



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, FEBRUARY 13, 2022  
JEREMIAH 17:5-10; PSALM 1; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:12-20; LUKE 6:17-26

## BEING HAPPY IS IMPORTANT

### *Psalm 1*

- 1 Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor lingered in the way of sinners,  
nor sat in the seats of the scornful!
- 2 Their delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and they meditate on his law day and night.
- 3 They are like trees planted by streams of water,  
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither;  
everything they do shall prosper.
- 4 It is not so with the wicked;  
they are like chaff which the wind blows away.
- 5 Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes,  
nor the sinner in the council of the righteous.
- 6 For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked is doomed.

The very first word of the Psalter, the Book of Psalms, is “Happy.” Psalm 1, Word 1.

Traditional rabbinic interpretation of Hebrew Scripture would not consider this to be incidental, or accidental. Certain forms of Jewish Biblical interpretation consider every word, every letter of every word to be carrying potential meaning, the possibility of

revelation. And so it is worth considering, that the Psalter ... a whopper of a book, with 150 songs, spanning lamentation through praise, despair through joy, the range of human emotion ... this significantly large book of Hebrew Scripture begins with the word Happy.

... it begins by telling who it is that's happy.

Happy, as we might understand it in English, doesn't really capture the Hebrew word it's attempting to translate. *Ashre*, is the Hebrew word. This kind of "happy" isn't a fleeting moment of uplifted-ness, a transient emotional response to something that's just made us smile. *Ashre*-happy is perhaps better understood as a deep state of peace, an abiding rightness that's found when living most fully into our relationship with God. The "Happy" of the Psalmist is the result a covenantal way of living, it's what arises from an ongoing life practice; it is not a destination emotion, it itself is not what we're aiming for; it's the way of living that **yields** this happiness, that yields *ashre*, that the Psalmist is pointing us to.

What's understood as ultimate here, is living rightly before God.

Living rightly before God, growing in righteousness and holiness is our task, our call, and "Happiness" is the fruit of such a life.

Our dominant culture, our very loud dominant culture would have it a little different. It would have us believe that **the pursuit** of happiness is in fact our task ... and so it has us set our sights on all those things that will make us happy, even if only for a moment. And it encourages us to pursue them, relentlessly, in order to be happy, continuously. And so we pursue happiness,

we chase it, with a dogged determination: personal achievements, and successes, new things, possessions, entertainment, excitement – any and all things that'll make us feel good, that seem to make us happy, if only for a moment. We chase the promise of happiness as the way to be happy; but this happiness doesn't last, sometimes it can't even quite be grasped.

There are, undoubtedly, many **things** in life that make us genuinely and authentically happy but living in such a way that these things become our **source** of happiness, this will always keep us from being *ashre*, from being happy in the way the Psalmist describes.

To be "Happy" for the Psalmist, to be *Ashre*, is to know fully and deeply the fruit of *ashre*-aligning behaviors and attitudes. These behaviors and attitudes are our human responses to God's Scriptural commands – that we must love God with all our heart, all our mind, and all our soul, and we must love one another as ourselves; that we must do justice, love goodness, and walk humbly with our God; that we must feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the prisoner. That we love one another as Christ loved us.

All these commands, these Scriptural commands, at their heart, in their essence, are

relational – each one of these commands requires our acknowledgement that we are, like it or not, in relationship with each other, with the planet, and with God. ... For those of us whose cultural inheritance is individualism, *living* this reality, and being obedient to these Scriptural imperatives – not just doing good things or good deeds for some people some of the time, but actually *living* in the fully relational way we are called to live by God ... for those of us formed within and by this individualistic culture, this is hard.

And perhaps that's because, in an individualistic culture, a human person can be thought of in some ways like an onion ... bear with me ... like an onion, the outer layers are different for each of us, they're impacted, shaped by where and how we were raised, but peel them away, and contained within is the "essential us, the essential human" that part of us that exists once all the outer layers have been removed. With this way of thinking, we can separate ourselves from our environment, we can easily conceptualize our autonomy, we begin to actually see ourselves as discrete, self-contained individuals. We come to believe that there is something about us that remains when we peel away the richness of our social context, peel away our relationships, our communities, our environment. It's this way of thinking that

tricks us into believing that we alone create our good fortune or bad, we alone are responsible for our successes and failures, our prosperity, or our hardship. Given this view of self, individualism also encourages us judge others for their circumstances or situation.

This way of understanding being human as being an individual, is a long way from being "of one body," this way of understanding is all about being "separate," autonomous, independent. Don't be an onion!

Fortunately, this is just one way of seeing it. The self, me as an individual, for instance, I can instead understand *myself* as a part of the collective whole, knitted into community with others, and knitted into the very place and time in which I live; my environment, relationships, geographic location, and time in history, none of this is merely an *influence* on who I am, instead it actually constitutes who I am, it makes me who I am. I am not someone who has relationships, I am who I am, right down to my very essence because of my relationships, because of where I live and when. *I* cannot be separated from any of these things.

I am, we all are, undeniably interconnected and interdependent – we are smudged together, each of our lives one with the other, with the planet ... and ultimately, and most

significantly, with God. Individualism as we experience it today is peculiarly modern and peculiarly western and it is not consistent with the Gospel view of the human person.

The fruit of a life lived in and as relationship, the fruit of a life fully open and receptive to God's presence, life that's cultivated rightly to be responsive to the life-giving reality of God, this is what's illuminated in the healing justice Jesus speaks to in today's Gospel reading. In our English translation we heard the word blessed, but this is, in fact, is a translation of the Greek word that means *ashre*, Happy as the Psalmist would have us understand it.

We are being called to pay attention to the way we live. Being happy/*ashre* is important.

Happy are we ... when we are freed of the illusion, the delusion, of individualism.

Happy are we ... when we come to truly understand how each of our lives is inseparably bound, **smudged up** in and with the lives of others, when we see that all our decision-making, all our actions have consequences for others, directly and indirectly.

Happy are we ... when we come to Jesus, when we hear His words, and when we cultivate our lives rightly and intentionally in response.

... and Happy are we ... when justice and liberation, when restoration to God and one another in Christ becomes what is ultimate, becomes our reason, becomes what guides our living and being – because that, that is the fruit. **That** is what it is to be happy.



SAINT MARK'S  
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL